

If Trees Could Speak: Stories of Australia's Greatest Trees

by Bob Beale

Publisher: Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2007. 245 pages, colour photographs; paperback; ISBN 9781741142761. RRP \$39.95

In spite of the references to trees in the title, this book is somewhat different from the usual types of natural history book reviewed in *The Victorian Naturalist*.

In fact, much of the book is not about trees. As the main title suggests, it is an assemblage of nearly 50 brief factual stories within nine themes, covering a range of facets of Australia's history and culture. Generally, the trees are seen as silent, but nonetheless important, witnesses to over two centuries of events.

The stories are drawn from Aboriginal and European cultures; the trees featured are both native and introduced. For example, under 'Trees with spirit, we have The Canoe Tree, The Prison Tree, The Fairy Tree and others. 'Proclamation, Separation, Federation' includes The Federation Oak and The Separation Tree. There are 'Trees with vision', such as The Cazneau Tree, Namatjira's trees, and so on. Politics, conflicts, the arts, memorials, notable personalities are all represented. It is not until the last third of the book that the focus falls on the trees themselves, with sections covering the oldest trees, the biggest trees and 'other great Australian trees, past and present'.

I was interested to know more about the author, Bob Beale, but the only mention I could find in the book was 'Faculty of Science, University of NSW' (the website indicates he is Public Affairs Manager). He writes with obvious feeling, not only for the trees which he clearly respects, and in which he often sees symbolism, but also for the country's human history and current attitudes. Understandably, he laments the loss of some significant arboreal landmarks, especially when such loss is the result of incompetent management by authorities (as, for example, 'El Grande', the giant Mountain Ash in Tasmania). On the other hand, he marvels that we still have 'The Bennelong Twins'—two Forest Red Gums (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*) near the Sydney Opera House—which somehow have survived since before The First Fleet.

The book covers such a wide spectrum of the country's history that it is impossible here to do justice to the diversity of its accounts. The 'stories' range in length from a few paragraphs to about 11 pages. All are very readable and full of intriguing information and touches of humour, though not without the author's own perspectives and opinions. As far as I could tell, the information and accounts are historically accurate.

In addition to the 'stories', there are several pages focusing on specific subjects, such as the sculptor Ola Cohn who carved The Fairy Tree, botanist Doug Benson, and Mountain Ash.

The photographs deserve special mention. Most are by the author, and are atmospheric and evocative as well as descriptive. The overall design of the book is pleasingly uncluttered and attractive.

Bob Beale writes colourfully and engagingly, whilst also being thought provoking. This is a book which can be enjoyed by anyone. I certainly recommend it.

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